Troilus and Cressida
A World of Disillusion

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Troilus and Cressida follows *Hamlet* chronologically, and, though Theodore Spencer comments that *Troilus* "is obviously not an improvement on it as a play,"[1] we cannot fail to feel that in *Troilus* Shakespeare makes an exploration which has not been done in *Hamlet*.

The most noticeable difference must be the main characters' behaviours to the reality of individual or society. In terms of appearance and reality, we must remember that in *Hamlet* the reality, the thing what is, is shown as early as in Act I. On the other hand, in *Troilus* the reality is revealed in the last Act. Hamlet is given an information that, of course he is not sure is it is true or not and has to seek truth, the throne is in the hand of the murderer at the beginning of the play. At this moment Hamlet experiences the collapse of his own universe and, consequently, he is forced to take some action. Thus the story of Hamlet begins with the conflict between the thing as it is and the thing as it should be. The conflict serves as the motive of the title hero's action.

In *Troilus* the revelation of the reality becomes the final judgement on the central characters' deeds. Troilus loves Cressida without knowing, in fact he has no intention to know, the reality. It is true that he once asks,

> Tell me, Apollo, for thy Daphne's love,
> What Cressid is, what Pander, and what we. (I.i. 98-9)[2]

This question, however, remains unanswered till, in the last act, it becomes clear that she is a whore.

Through the debate before Priam whether Helen shall be kept and the war continued, Troilus, as Norman Rabkin says, "reveals that his own attitude toward the return of Helen is based on his attitude toward Cressida."[3] Troilus insists they should keep Helen because she is a pearl. We have seen, however, Troilus abuse the same woman as 'too starv'd a subject for my sword.' Troilus does not realise this inconsistency in his attitude. Now does he realise that the problem of Helen is not only a test for his personal concept of manhood and honour, but also the concern of the whole country. Troilus is confined in the personal world of self-interest. Nor, we know why Troilus says that Helen is a pearl; because Cressida is a pearl. Troilus' tendency to be subjective is most clearly shown in his reply to Hector's opinion that Helen is not worth the loss of the Trojan lives.

What's aught but as 'tis valued ? (II.ii. 52)

What he proposes here is the subjective evaluation and it is linked with his idealism. By the time Troilus' inclination to be subjective is revealed, we can expect that his question about the nature of Cressida will not be fully answered by himself. He would rather enjoy the idealistic vision than make an effort to know the truth.

Then what is Cressida ? In III.ii, we see Troilus and Cressida exchange the words of love. Troilus is idealistic, saying nothing but that he is a faithful lover. Cressida is tactfully enjoying Troilus' wooing. What she loves is the process.

Women are angels, wooing:
Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing. (I.ii. 286-7)

Northrop Frye comments that Cressida "feels that she can only be adequately loved as long as she makes her lover 'tarry,' in the role of a perpetually elusive Courtly Love gooddess. Once possessed by Troilus, an act she bitterly resents because it breaks her will to 'hold off,' she enters the world of Sisyphus, ready to be possessed again by whoever is present, like the host in Ulysses' time speech."[4] Cressida yields herself up to Diomedes on the very first night in the Greek camp before Troilus' eyes, saying:

> Troilus, farewell ! one eye yet looks on thee,
> But with my heart the other eye doth see.
> Ah, poor our sex ! this fault in us I find,
> The error of our eye directs our mind.
> What error leads must err; O then conclude,
> Minds sway'd by eyes are full of turpitude.
>
> (V.ii. 107-12)

It is her own problem, but she attributes the fault not to herself but to her sex, womanhood. Cressida, like Troilus, has no intention to know her own mind. Cressida lacks moral insight, though she is "only the feminine of the rest of them."[5]

Hector's problem is that he dismisses the reasoned opinion so easily to satisfy his self-interest. He shows us, contrary to Troilus, rational and objective viewpoint, at least at the beginning of the debate.

> But value dwells not in particular will,
> It holds his estimate and dignity,
> As well wherein 'tis precious of itself
> As in the prizer. (II.ii. 53-6)

Here in terms of the conflict between will and reason, which is one of the play's plot-lines, as Troilus' evaluation is linked with will, Hector's is with reason. Then, suddenly, he shifts the course of his argument. Just after insisting that Helen should be returned, Hector agrees that she should be kept.

Hector's opinion

Is this in way of truth; yet ne'er the less,
My spritely brethren, I propend to you
In resolution to keep Helen still,
For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependance
Upon our joint and several dignities.

(*Ibid.* 188-93)

Hector adopts the code of chivalry in his argument and lets it overcome his reasoned opinion. It is clear that this is the first step that leads him to death. Nevill Coghill says that Hector "makes his somersault light-heartedly: it is the first of the three misguided actions taken by him that lead to his death; he should have listened to Cassandra and she makes her only other entrance to show him his death in her vision (V. iii 80-7). But Hector had not heeded her enough to win him from the attractions of honour, brotherhood and prestige, so characteristic of the chivalric hero, that had brought about his sudden change of mind."[6] Chivalric-heroism requires him to seek honour which is personal and subjective. At this crucial moment, he proves himself no more free from the obsession of subjective will than his brother Troilus.

Hector challenges a Greek soldier to a single combat which would certainly satisfy his honour-seeking chivalric heroism, though it has nothing to do with the war itself. Like other characters in the Trojan and the Greek camp except Ulysses, he seems to have no intention to win the war. In V.vi, Hector

and Achilles fight. This is not a 'sportful combat', but when his opponent drops the sword, Hector offers a favour. Achilles does not share this chivalric heroism and later he attacks Hector when he is taking rest with helmet and shield putting off. This is the most cruel and ironical betrayal by the reality. Hector's devotion to honour has made him disregard his own reasoned resolution, but his chivalric heroism proves to be meaningless. Coghill says that the Hector story is the most important comparing with the love story of Troilus and the political story of Ulysses, for "it dominates and determines all the others. Hector alone suffers death – as we shall see, a tragic death – and this in itself confers dramatic eminence upon him. More yet, his death dooms Troy."[7] Whether the Hector story is the most important of all other plots is, it seems to me, a question. I take it one of the facets of this play and equally important as others. Shakespeare is making the disillusion concrete by piling up examples.

Hector, Troilus and Cressida prove themselves to be truant in searching for and acknowledging the reality. Hector dies, but Troilus and Cressida, even at the end of the play, keep the same positions where they were at the beginning of the play. The end of the play is another, but not new, starting point for them, and there is little prospect for improvement.

In the Greek camp, Ulysses depicts their problem quite clearly. Philip Edwards gives a summary of several proposes in Ulysses' famous 'Degree' speech. "First, he wishes to insist on the necessity of obedience, since only by obedience can the framer of policies carry his plans into action. Secondly, as a support to his first purpose, he wishes to attach to the Greek leadership a divine authority: for though he may, perhaps, consider his own role in leadership more important than that of others, his own usefulness depends on a general sense of awe towards the high command, especially Agamemnon. Thirdly, he wishes

to do, in a much more effective way, what Nestor and Agamemnon have done in their speeches. . . . Ulysses can encourage morale while pointing to their own faultiness and frightening his hearers with a vivid picture of the consequences of anarchy."[8] The burden is on Ulysses' shoulder, for Agamemnon does not realise that he has to regain the authority as a leader. As critics like Spencer and Muir, and lots of others, point out, Ulysses is "the only real intellectual in the Greek camp"[9] and "the voice of common sense and political wisdom."[10] In the Trojan camp, as we have seen, Hector, though for a short while, plays the role of intellect in the debate. Their difference is that whereas Hector's main concern is how to save his honour and has not pursued the course of reason to the end, Ulysses concerns only how to re-establish order in the Greek camp and how to put his purpose into practice. We notice, however, there is a gap between his intention and the way he practises it. All he can do is to make Ajax fight against Hector and send Achilles back to the battlefield using tricks. Somehow his behaviour in the conversation with Ajax reminds us of the role of Thersites. One extreme statement on Ulysses is shown to us by S.L. Bethell. He comments that "there is a suggestion of deity about Ulysses; we must accept his moral judgements, but we must not search the morality of his own conduct, which is, as it were, an Olympian setting of the stage for human conflict."[11] This view of Ulysses, however, seems to me too optimistic. Ulysses is no more a part in the whole pattern of the play than others and what we must search is, contrary to Bethell's opinion, the discrepancy between his "moral judgement" and "the morality of his own conduct." Otherwise we will miss one of the implications of the play. We must not forget that even Ulysses suffers "the almost incomprehensible gap between what the mind can think and desire, and what the body can perform."[12]

In *Troilus*, we see no improvement; only time passes by and things take place regardless the characters' intentions. 'Time' in this play seems to bear malice to the characters. Hamlet, on the other hand, grows, develops and improves through the play. The process is clearly shown in his series of soliloquies. "At the beginning", Spencer sums up, "there was a horrible split between his view of the world as it should be and the world as it is. At the end he is reconciled; and his reconciliation has both matured and ennobled him. He sees himself no longer in relation to a lustful mother and a vicious king; the immediate is replaced by the universe."[13] It is true that Hamlet fails to overcome the destructive process of 'Time', but he struggled passionately to solve an important problem forced by fate. He is active in searching the answer and, therefore, he comes to the peaceful state of mind at the last moment of his life. His last word shines through the darkness of the play's atmosphere. The world of *Troilus* is far from this peaceful state.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare concentrates on the hero's life and, therefore, the play becomes so deep in meaning. In the case of *Troilus*, every character has his own problem and every problem is seen from various angles. The scene where Cressida's infidelity is revealed is the best example of it. In this scene we have four characters to see one event. Cressida gives an excuse and interpretation of her own action. Troilus sees it emotionally and is distracted. Ulysses sees it calmly. Then, there is Thersites, to whom everything is lechery. The effect may be baffling, but it gives the play a wide, if not as deep as *Hamlet*, understanding of humanity.

The characters of *Troilus* show us the vision of life's helplessness. The play's implication strikes us down with its pessimism. It must have some relation to the mood of the society. In the year 1601–2, in which the play is thought to be written, the glorious Elizabethan age, that is characterised by

its "faith in vitality, its worship of the glorious processes of life, an expansion and elation of mind which corresponds directly to the upward movement of a prosperous and expanding society,"[14] comes nearly to its end. The play reflects the age's mood of disillusionment and the sense of futility of man's life.

NOTES

1. Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, 1942), p. 121.
2. All the quotations are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare.*
3. Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York, 1967), pp. 38–9.
4. Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), P. 67.
5. A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns* (London, 1961), p. 134.
6. Nevill Coghill, *Shakespeare's Professional Skills* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 121.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
8. Philip Edwards, *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art* (London, 1968), pp. 98–9.
9. Kenneth Muir, 'Troilus and Cressida' *Shakespeare Survey* vol. 8, p. 35.
10. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

11. S.L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (New York, 1944), p. 122.

12. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

14. Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Jacobean Drama* (London, 1936), p. 1.

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